

THE FUTURE BATTLEFIELD

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For the Army, the future is very important. Our activity in peacetime is substantially directed towards preparing for the time when circumstances might change for the worse. Thus, in peacetime we train and build the force so that it is better able to respond in the event of war.

Most of these preparations are designed to have the Army ready for what just might happen in a few months or years time. But for some capabilities, many years of preparation are needed: training some senior officers and technical specialists, building advanced military equipment and any major restructuring. As a result it is always necessary to keep an eye on the distant horizon to see what the next challenge might be.

One way Army was able to better understand the challenges of the future as seen from 1996 was through hosting the Chief of the General Staff's Exercise. The theme this year was *The Future Battlefield*. Lieutenant General John Sanderson, Chief of the General Staff (CGS), took the opportunity to gather together in Darwin senior officers from the Army and elsewhere in Defence, representatives of our allies and near neighbours, as well as some prominent academics over a period of three days in May to discuss the nature of future warfare.

Forecasting: an imperfect process

It has become one of the truisms about the future that it is best understood once it has passed. A consensus view of the future is impossible to derive. Even if some compromise position was adopted, the future is a fickle thing and the odds are that reality will be nothing like what was predicted. In recent years, we have had some stark reminders of the capacity of the future to generate surprises: the demise of the once mighty Soviet Union and the threat of Communism, and the creation of a loose alliance of the US, Israel and most Arab states to confront Iraq in 1990-91 were two almost impossible scenarios - except when viewed with hindsight.

The point about studying the future is that we are rarely looking for the one "correct" model. To some extent, everyone's ideas have something to contribute. What leaders, policy advisers, and even the lay person, needs to do is dissect them. What are the assumptions that underlie them? What are the broad trends? What do they tell us about our plans? What are the sorts of events that could cause the predictions to come unstuck?

Former US Army Brigadier General Harold Nelson, provided his own list of questions that help him assess the basis of any forecast. Brigadier General Nelson's list asked ten questions about forecasts:

- When and where was the item published? Where does it fit into the pattern of current events which might have shaped thinking about the forecast?
- What is the background of the author? Are there any apparent interests or biases?
- What is the author's attitude towards war? Is war an inevitable part of political commerce or a disaster to be avoided?
- What is the period depicted? Is it a forecast for the near-term or the distant future?
- What is the transition to war scenario? Is war the result of calculation, blundering or irrational passions?
- What level of war receives the most attention? Is it the tactics of the battlefield or the deliberations

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of top policy-makers?

- What is the arm of emphasis? Does the author concentrate on the naval, land or air conflict?
- What is the scope of the conflict? Who are the main protagonists? Will the war be fought in a single theatre or spread across continents?
- What is the critical factor determining the outcome? Is it particular weapon systems, strong leadership, prepared forces which can rapidly mobilise or the contribution of allies that leads to victory?
- How is conflict termination/peace depicted? Will there be an army of occupation, will a new democratic government be built in the ruins of the old one, or will the bitter legacy of conflict simply smoulder until at some point in the future a new conflict flares up?

Three trends for the future

The CGS Exercise revealed a number of ongoing and emerging trends in warfare. In broad they could be grouped under three headings:

- technology,
- morality and politics, and
- integration.

Inevitably, technology will change the shape of the future battlefield. This century we saw the trenches of World War One created by the machine gun and artillery, the fluid campaigns of World War Two dominated by the tank and the aeroplane, and the stand-off of the Cold War backed by nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The pace of technological development has not slowed.

Computers, modern communications and information technology more broadly will have a major influence on what happens on the battlefield. New sensor technology is offering the prospects of commanders really knowing what is occurring on the battlefield in near real time. And with this information, battlefield commanders can employ precision guided munitions to destroy hostile targets. According to some commentators we have entered a "revolution in military affairs" which will fundamentally change the future battlefield.

Technology can create new arenas to be fought over. Just as the submarine took war to the ocean depths and the aircraft spread it through the atmosphere, emergent technology can take it even further. The outer space could become one battlefield, the electromagnetic spectrum and other communications systems another.

With technology comes the demands for armed forces to change their doctrine and organisation to more effectively exploit the tools at hand.

Technological advances present the image of an almost clinical conflict. Many are left with the images of the 1991 Gulf War where the allies defeated one of the world's largest armed forces yet suffered very few casualties of their own. Was this the harbinger of future war? For some, this is the example that should provide a model for the future. To others, it was the mother of all special cases - it is unlikely that such a one sided conflict will ever be fought again. For many of the delegates there was a recognition that war is a bloody and messy business, and that we should not start with the conception that it will be easy or risk free.

That war should have a political dimension is hardly news. "War is ... a continuation of political intercourse carried on by other means"^[1] is the most famous aphorism of the great 19th century Prussian theorist, Carl von Clausewitz. Nor is morality a new issue. It troubled Saint Augustine in the

4th century when he sought to explain how Christians could be involved in war. Yet up to this century, the politics and morality of war were those of Machiavelli - states should pursue their own power by the best means that they have at hand.

This century has seen some important changes. After the stillborn League of Nations, the United Nations has demonstrated some success. Despite many criticisms, it has served as a forum for addressing world security problems. Importantly, it has changed the way states view war. Today, states are less likely to mount war without at least the semblance of legitimacy such as provided by a United Nations mandate. States that once would go to war simply to serve national interests are more likely to build coalitions first.

The beginning of this century saw the emergence of total war, where the civilian became an integral part of the war machine and an equally legitimate target. While, after a couple of false starts, the United Nations Charter finally outlawed aggressive wars, a string of treaties also sought to protect the victims of war - prisoners, the wounded, the shipwrecked and civilians. Today, civilian targets are no longer considered legitimate.

Finally there is integration. Almost every speaker recognised the increasing importance of "jointery" of the ability of armies to work together with air forces and navies in a seamless way. But the issues of integration went beyond this. When Brigadier General Nelson introduced his concept of "integrated warfare", he took it a little further. Increasing integration would also impact on civil-military relations, on the relations between the combat and the support elements, and on the flow of information between different components of a military force.

While not addressed directly, the distinctions between the levels of war are also blurring. Warfighting is less easily categorised into neat boxes, as opposed to a complex and integrated whole. Tactical weapon systems frequently have strategic reach, and potentially either strategic or tactical effects. Consider, for example, the employment of cruise missiles against Iraq. General Sanderson cited as an example, the Israeli shelling of a Hezbollah rocket position which killed Lebanese refugees - "this one incident had a profound strategic effect".

One constant?

Perhaps it was a reflection of the gathering, but there appeared to be consensus on one point. That is that the state is still going to be the most important player in the future world, and that in many cases they will seek to resolve their disagreements by force. All of this notwithstanding the growing importance of morality.

Besides the United Nations, it was recognised that other non-state actors can play an important part in international relations, multinational corporations and sub-national groups (such as ethnic or religious groups, political extremists, and so on). But still, this was seen as having a relatively small effect.

Amongst states, some are clearly more important than others. Professor Paul Dibb argued that security prospects for the Asia-Pacific would be determined essentially by five great powers - the United States, Russia, China, India and Japan - and the balance of power between them.

And still more uncertainties

Whatever trends we identify, we need to keep in mind that these only provide us with a baseline against which we can measure the changes provided by reality. The essence of conflict is that it is needed in response to discontinuities, shocks and catastrophes. A purely steady-state world would see a peaceful environment in which armies have no place. Yet based on our experience of the past, greed, passion, mischief or scheming will surely force states into conflict.

The exact circumstances which will lead to war are extraordinarily difficult to predict, while the timing is impossible. For example, while the collapse of Yugoslavia was widely predicted to follow in the wake of Tito's death, that country defied predictions for a decade before the Balkans were finally swept by

violence and anarchy.

And if the cause and timing of conflict presents a challenge for forecasters, the nature of conflict is even harder to pin down. Large forces in many states still confront their neighbours. With the prospects of nuclear weapons spreading, the prospects of high intensity conflicts were not ruled out. Others argued that it was the ambition and nationalism in medium powers that could be the most significant feature of future war - still fighting by essentially conventional means. Still others saw low intensity conflict - guerrilla war and peacekeeping - as being most characteristic of the future. For military planners, such as those of Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, the challenge was how to structure forces to meet the variety of perceptions of the future. How do you meet the most likely sorts of war, but still have the flexibility to deal with other possibilities which might arise suddenly or evolve over time?

We do not need to look back too far in history to see how our views of the future can be upset by the unexpected. I still have a bookshelf full of writings on Communist military theory.

1. Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989. p 87.

The full proceedings of Chief of the General Staff's Exercise, *The Future Battlefield*, was published by Deakin University Press in late 1996. The papers were edited by Dr Mohan Malik.

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